



## *The Macabresque: Human Violation and Hate in Genocide, Mass Atrocity, and Enemy-Making* by Edward Weisband.

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In *The Macabresque*, professor of international relations Edward Weisband (Virginia Tech) asks why perpetrators of genocide torture and shame their victims during the killing process. Many studies of the Holocaust and other genocides have focused on the scale of death and victimization and how such actions were implemented. But a critical question remains: why do perpetrators waste time and resources humiliating and torturing their victims before execution? If they simply wish to eliminate the targeted group, why not kill as many as possible as quickly as possible? Weisband argues that the victims' deaths per se are not the main concern of the perpetrators. Instead, genocide is the means by which they attain what they actually desire—the *satisfaction of inflicting mass death and violation*.

Weisband describes this performative aspect of genocide as the “macabresque,” a play on the word “carnavalesque,” an adjective that “sometimes refers to the festivity at play during intersessional times of debauchery and killing” (4). He uses “macabresque” to describe “the performative transgression, dramaturgies, and aesthetics of human violation in genocide and mass atrocity” (7). In other words, the macabresque is the “sadistic theatrical character” that accompanies genocide and mass human violation (9). Weisband draws heavily on psychoanalysis, particularly Lacanian Theory, to examine the common personality traits and group behaviors of perpetrators across time and space.

*The Macabresque* comprises four parts: the first is an introduction and literature review of major works by historians, political scientists, and others who have used psychoanalysis to analyze genocide and perpetrator behaviors. Part II concerns the intersection of group dynamics, individual personality, and culture within the context of the macabresque. The author contends that

self-exhibitionism provides a theoretical basis for interpreting the macabresque as a discrete phenomenon in mass atrocity violence. The desire among perpetrators to bond together is forged by means of their desire for shared self-exhibition and for voyeuristic power and control over the bodies of others in the process. These desires can, and do, function among perpetrators who are appropriately considered to be normal and ordinary. But these desires may as well progressively become more, not less insistent as perpetrators perform their excesses and outrages..... This provides a basis for interpreting why perpetrators in war or conflict, especially those deemed normal at the onset of hostilities, so often appear to become inured to its violence and cruelties. (65)

In short, perpetrators want to shame, torture, and kill their victims because of a need for power, group dynamics, and an insatiable bloodlust amplified in conditions simultaneously chaotic, anxiety provoking, threatening, and conducive to retaliation.

In Part III, Weisband applies the macabresque motif to the following case studies: Maoist China, the Armenian Genocide, Stalin's Great Terror, Nazi medical experiments, Cambodia, Argentina, Rwanda, and Bosnia. Spanning the twentieth century, they all feature the macabresque as a defining trait within differing performances. Although Weisband attributes these differences to

the effects of culture on “beliefs, attitudes, and predispositions” (255), he also discerns a primary commonality among perpetrators—specifically, their attempt to regain “lost” honor by first shaming and then executing their victims.

In Part IV, the author draws conclusions about what he sees as a delicate relationship between the state, and exclusivist definitions of nationality. In particular, he warns that when nationality is defined so narrowly that specific racial, ethnic, religious, or cultural groups are denied the privilege of belonging, genocide can result from the state’s urge to “purify” the national body.

*The Macabresque* is an important book that asks an important question: why is victim torture a fixture of genocide, if extermination of the targeted group is the supposed goal? Weisband’s answer is that perpetrators revel in the violence of shaming and humiliating their victims. The macabresque framework offers a new way of describing and categorizing perpetrator behavior, but does not directly explain why perpetrators act as they do. Although not drawn from Lacanian Theory, an important factor Edward Weisband identifies is the link between honor and shame. Such powerful concepts transcend cultures and can be weaponized to inflict harm on many levels. Future research would benefit from closer attention to the honor-shame dynamic as a way of understanding perpetrator behaviors. *The Macabresque* is sure to attract readers across disciplines, especially scholars of the Holocaust and genocide studies, political scientists, historians, and psychologists.